APOLOGIA.

FOUR LETTERS TO A MINISTER OF AN INDEPENDANT CHURCH: BY A MINISTER OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND.

——— Quid me alta silentia cogis
Rumpere ——? VIRG.

Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another. For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love.

ROM. xiv. 19. GAL. v. 6.

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M DCC LXXXIV.

APOLOGIA.

LETTER I.

My dear friend and brother,

YOU have more than once gently called upon me for the reaſons which induced me to exerciſe my miniſtry as a Clergyman of the Church of England, rather than among the

BRITISH MUSEUM

APOLOGIA.

LETTER I.

My dear friend and brother,

YOU have more than once gently called upon me for the reaſons which induced me to exerciſe my miniſtry as a Clergyman of the Church of England, rather than among the

Diſſenters, where my firſt religious connections were formed, and with many of whom I ſtill maintain a cordial friendſhip. Hitherto I have uſually waved the ſubject, and contented myſelf with aſſuring you in general terms, that as the preference I gave to the eſtabliſhment was the reſult of ſerious, and, I truſt, impartial enquiry; ſo I had never ſeen reaſon to repent of it, no not for a minute, ſince the day of my ordination. I now purpoſe to give you a more particular anſwer. And as you are not the only perſon who have expreſſed a friendly ſurprize at my choice, I ſhall communicate my reaſons from the

preſs,

preſs, that all my friends who have been at a loſs to account for my conduct may have ſuch ſatiſfaction as it is in my power to give them. I ſhall, however, keep *you* particularly in my eye while I write, that a juſt ſenſe of the candor and affection with which you have always treated me, may regulate my pen, and preſerve me (if poſſible) from that harſh and angry ſpirit, into which writers upon controverſial points, are too often betrayed.

I confeſs that as in this buſineſs my conſcience is clear in the ſight of Him to whom alone I am properly accountable; I could wiſh ſtill to continue ſilent, and ſubmit

to be a little miſunderſtood by ſome perſons whoſe good opinion I prize, rather than trouble the public with what more immediately relates to myſelf. But ſomething upon this ſubject ſeems expedient in the preſent day; not ſo much by way of apology for one or a few individuals, as with a view of obviating prejudices, and preventing, or at leaſt abating, the unhappy effects of a party-ſpirit.

There was a time when the Non-conformiſts groaned under the iron rod of oppreſſion, and were expoſed to fines, penalties, and impriſonment, as well as to cruel mockings, and the lawleſs

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rage of a rabble, for worſhipping God according to the light of their conſciences. Yet I apprehend their non-conformity was rather the occaſional and oſtenſible, than the real cauſe of the hard treatment they met with. The greater part of the Non-conformiſt Miniſters of that day were the light and glory of the land.—They were men full of faith and of the Holy Ghoſt, penetrated with a deep ſenſe of the Redeemer's glory and love, and of the worth of ſouls. Their miniſtrations were accompanied with unction and power, and they were inſtrumental in turning many ſinners from their evil ways. It is no wonder

that the world hated ſuch men; that ſnares were ſpread for their feet, their liberty abridged, and that many ſaid, Away with them, they are not worthy to live! It is probable that if theſe ſervants of the Moſt High could have enjoyed that freedom for their perſons and aſſemblies, which, in anſwer to their prayers, is now poſſeſſed by thoſe who bear the ſame name, they would have been well ſatisfied that the eſtabliſhed Church ſhould have remained in peaceful poſſeſſion of its own order and ritual. And ſeveral among them, not the loweſt in repute for widom and piety, continued long to worſhip occaſionally

ally in the Pariſh Churches, after they had been ejected from them as preachers. But things were ſtudiouſly carried againſt them with a high hand. The exaction of re-ordination, and the little time allowed for ſubſcribing the book of Common-prayer, which many of the Miniſters had not been able to procure when the law called for their aſſent to it; were two circumſtances which greatly contributed to ſwell the Bartholomew-liſt. It was well known to ſome of the leaders in that unhappy buſineſs, that there were among the Non-conformiſts wiſe and moderate men, who were not diſpoſed to quit their parochial cures, un-

leſs they were conſtrained by the harſheſt and moſt violent meaſures; ſuch therefore were the meaſures they adopted.

It is our mercy to live in more quiet times. We are on all ſides freed from reſtraints in religious concerns; and every perſon is at liberty to profeſs, preach, worſhip, or print as he thinks proper. But it is ſtill to be lamented, that they who are united upon the ſame foundations, and agree in the ſame important leading principles, ſhould lay ſo much ſtreſs upon their circumſtantial differences in ſentiment, as to prevent the exerciſe of mutual love and forbearance: and that inſtead of labour-

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ing in concert within their reſpective departments, to promote the common cauſe, they ſhould be at leiſure to vex and worry each other with needleſs diſputation, and uncharitable cenſure. I hope, amongſt us, the High Church principles which formerly produced unjuſtifiable and oppreſſive effects, are now generally exploded. But may we not lay a claim in our turn, to that moderation, candor, and tenderneſs, from our diſſenting brethren, which we chearfully exerciſe towards them? But as we (I think) are no longer the aggreſſors, ſo they ſeem no longer content to ſtand upon the defenſive. We

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wiſh to join them with heart and hand in ſupporting and ſpreading the great truths of the Goſpel; and ſuch as you, my friend, approve our aims and rejoïce with us, if God is pleaſed to give us ſucceſs. But there are thoſe among you, whoſe perſons and general conduct we reſpect, from whom we do not find equal returns of good-will, becauſe we cannot join with them in the ſupport of a palladium which bears the name of the *Diſſenting Intereſt*. I know not whether this phraſe was in uſe a hundred years ago, but were I to meet with it as referring to that period, I ſhould underſtand by it little more or leſs

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than the intereſt of the Redeemer's kingdom. At preſent when I conſider the various names, views, and ſentiments which obtain among thoſe who form this aggregate, ſtiled the Diſſenting Intereſt, I am at a loſs what ſenſe to put upon the term. May I not ſay, without offence, that it is, at leaſt, a very heterogeneous body? May I not hope, without preſumption, that though you and I are not agreed on the ſubject of Church Government, yet I am related to you by a much nearer and ſtronger tie, than that which binds you to the Diſſenting Intereſt? I confeſs that ſo far as it is the intereſt of thoſe who depre-

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ciate the perſon and blood of the Saviour, and deny the agency and influence of the Holy Spirit, or the total depravity of fallen man, ſo far I cannot (in a religious view) be a friend to it. On the other hand, ſo far as it regards thoſe who love, avow, and preach the doctrines, experience, and practice, which both you and I include in our idea of the Goſpel, ſo far I can truly ſay, though not a Diſſenter myſelf, the Diſſenting Intereſt is dear to my heart, and has a ſhare in my daily prayers. And in this I am perſuaded I ſpeak the ſentiments of many, both miniſters and laymen in the eſtabliſhment. We are ſorry, therefore,

therefore, (at leaſt I am) ſorry, though not angry, when books are written, or declarations* (perhaps in the moſt ſolemn occaſions of worſhip) unſeaſonably made, which ſeem not ſo much deſigned to confirm Diſſenters in their own principles, as to place thoſe who cannot accede to them in an unfavourable light; the Miniſters eſpecially, who according to ſome repreſentations muſt be ſuppoſed to be almoſt deſtitute of common ſenſe, or elſe of common honeſty.

When I write a letter, eſpecially to a friend, I think myſelf releaſed

* Some of theſe letters were written in the year 1777.

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from that attention to method which I might obſerve if I was compoſing a treatiſe. As my heart dictates my pen moves. I therefore hope you will bear with me if I do not come directly to what I propoſed; which was, to give you ſome account of the motives of my own conduct. It may not be improper to premiſe a few preliminary obſervations. I ſhall not weary you by attempting to juſtify every thing that obtains in our way, nor call your attention to all the minutiæ which might furniſh ſubject for debate, to thoſe who know not how to employ their time better. It would be mere trifling to diſpute for or againſt

againſt a ſurplice or a band, a gown or a cloak, or to enquire whether it be the ſize, or the ſhape, which renders ſome of theſe habiliments more or leſs ſuitable for a Miniſter, than the others. But perhaps a few ſtrictures upon eſtabliſhments and liturgies may not be wholly impertinent to my deſign.

That national religious eſtabliſhments under the New Teſtament diſpenſation are neither of expreſs divine appointment, nor formed in all points upon a ſcriptural plan, I readily admit. Whether upon this account they cannot be ſubmitted to without violating the obedience we owe to the

Lord

Lord Jeſus as head and lawgiver of his Church, I ſhall conſider hereafter. At preſent permit me only to hope (for my own ſake) that ſuch ſubmiſſion is not abſolutely ſinful; and in that view to offer a word in favour of their expedience. I plead not for this or that eſtabliſhment, or the adminiſtration of one preferably to another; but chiefly for that circumſtance which I ſuppoſe is common to them all: I mean, the parcelling out a country, the government of which is profeſſedly Chriſtian, into certain diſtricts, analogous to what we call pariſhes, and fixing in each of thoſe diſtricts, a perſon with a miniſterial character, who

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by his office is engaged to promote the good of ſouls within the limits of his own boundary. I think the number of pariſhes in England and Wales is computed to be not much fewer than ten thouſand. The number of Diſſenting Churches and congregations in England and Wales (if thoſe whom I have conſulted as the moſt competent judges are not miſtaken) will not be found greatly to exceed one thouſand. In how many, or in how few of theſe the old puritan Goſpel (if I may ſo call it) is preached or prized, I deem you a better judge than myſelf. It is certain, that the number of Diſſenting Miniſters who are very

willing it ſhould be publicly known that they differ widely from the ſentiments of their fore-fathers, is not ſmall. However, we will take them all into the eſtimate. Now let us for a moment ſuppoſe the eſtabliſhment with all its proviſions removed and annihilated. In this caſe ſome of the Diſſenting Miniſters might indeed change their ſituations, and fix in places where they might hope for more extenſive influence; but as none of them could be in two places at once, about nine tenths of the kingdom would be deprived at a ſtroke, of the very form of public Religion, and reduced in a ſhort time (for any relief the Diſ-

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ſenting Intereſt could afford) to a ſtate little better than heatheniſm. That there is any regard paid to the Lord's-day through the greater part of the land, that the holy Scriptures are publicly read to thouſands who probably would otherwiſe know no more of the Bible than they do of the Koran, are good effects of the national eſtabliſhment, which I think can hardly be denied, even by thoſe who are moſt diſpleaſed with it. For this reaſon, if I could not conform to the eſtabliſhment myſelf, I think I ſhould ſpeak reſpectfully of it, and bleſs God for it. Some eſtabliſhed form of religious profeſſion, with a full and

free toleration for all who think they can ſerve God more acceptably upon a different plan, appears to me the moſt deſirable and promiſing conſtitution, for preſerving the rights of conſcience, and for promoting the welfare of ſouls. I believe, therefore, that the Church of England as by law eſtabliſhed (for it claims no higher title) though it be not a perfect inſtitution, and notwithſtanding its real or ſuppoſed defects, and the faults of individuals within its community, has been upon the whole, and will be, a bleſſing to the nation; and that its preſervation is an effect of the wiſe and gracious providence of

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the Great Head of the Church Univerſal.

From the expediency of parochial order, I would farther deduce the expediency of a rubric and liturgy. For I cannot conceive of an eſtabliſhed Church, without including in my idea ſome determinate rule or line reſpecting doctrine and worſhip, by which it is diſcriminated from other Churches which are not *ſo* eſtabliſhed. As to our liturgy, I am far from thinking it incapable of amendment; though, when I conſider the temper and ſpirit of the preſent times, I dare not wiſh that the improvement of it ſhould be attempted, leſt the intended

remedy might prove worſe than the diſeaſe. As I am not called to defend it, I ſhall only ſay what I believe will be allowed by many candid perſons on your ſide, that the general ſtrain of it is ſcriptural, evangelical, and experimental. It recognizes with preciſion the One Great object of worſhip, in his perſonal diſtinctions, and glorious attributes; the honours and offices of the Redeemer, the power and agency of the Holy Spirit, the evil of ſin, the depravity of man, and all the diſtinguiſhing doctrines of the Goſpel. As to the compoſition, I queſtion if any thing in the Engliſh language, (our verſion of the Bible excepted,)

excepted,) is worthy of being compared with it, for ſimplicity, perſpicuity, energy, and comprehenſive fulneſs of expreſſion. But I ſuppoſe the objection does not lie ſo much againſt our liturgy in particular, as in general againſt the uſe of liturgies of any kind. And for aught I know, if the compilers of our liturgy could have expected, that all the pariſhes in the kingdom, and from age to age, would be ſupplied with Miniſters competently acquainted with the myſteries of the Goſpel, and poſſeſſed of the Spirit of grace and ſupplication, they might have left them under leſs reſtraint in conducting public worſhip. I

believe many of the Diſſenters take it for granted, that a conſiderable part of our Clergy are not only unable to pray in public to the edification of their hearers without a form, but are unfit for the miniſterial office in every view. Should this be true, it is a truth which I hope would excite lamentation rather than ridicule or invective, in all who profeſs a regard to the glory of God, or love to the ſouls of men. But upon this ſuppoſition I ſhould think an evangelical liturgy a great bleſſing; as it muſt ſecure the people (that is the bulk of the nation) from being expoſed to the ſame uncertainty and diſappoint-

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ment from the reading-deſk, as they are liable to from the pulpit. For they who cannot or do not preach the Goſpel, are not likely to pray agreeably to the ſpirit of the Goſpel, if that part of the public ſervice was likewiſe left to their own management. Or ſhall we ſay, it is an advantage to ſome Diſſenting Congregations, that their Miniſters not being confined to a form of ſound words, there is little more of Chriſt or of grace to be found in their prayers than in their ſermons?

Is it not too haſtily taken for granted by many, that God cannot be worſhipped in ſpirit and in truth, by thoſe who uſe a form of prayer?

prayer? Or that he will not afford them who ſo approach him any teſtimony of his acceptance? If the words of a form ſuit and expreſs the deſires and feelings of my mind, the prayer is as much *my own*, as if I had conceived it upon the ſpot. On the other hand, if I have the greateſt readineſs and fluency in diverſifying expreſſions, ſo that my prayer ſhould always appear unſtudied and new, yet if my ſpirit or the ſpirit of thoſe who join with me, be not engaged in it, though I may admire my own performance, and be applauded by others, it is no better than a mere lifeleſs form, in the ſight of Him who ſearcheth the heart.

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Not to ſay, that many who profeſs to pray extempore, that is, without either a printed or a written form, go ſo much in a beaten path, that they who hear them frequently can tell with tolerable certainty how they will begin, when they are about the middle, and when they are drawing towards the cloſe of their prayer.

It is ſaid that a preſcribed form precludes the exerciſe of a gift in prayer, which is true; but then, as I hinted before, it in ſome good meaſure ſupplies the want of ſuch a gift; and bleſſed be the Lord, there are many living witneſſes who can declare to his praiſe, that a form does not reſtrain, much

much leſs preclude the exerciſe of grace. They know and are ſure that their Lord and Maſter owns and comforts them in what their brethren haſtily condemn them for. It is well for us that He ſeeth not as man ſeeth, and is no more a reſpecter of parties than of perſons.

It cannot be denied that the Lord himſelf appointed forms of prayer and praiſe to be uſed in the Old Teſtament Church. When the ark ſet forward, and when it reſted, Moſes addreſſed the Lord not according to the varied emotions of his own ſpirit, but ſtatedly in the ſame determinate expreſſions. Numb. x. 35, 36. So likewiſe

wiſe in the ſolemn benediction which the high-prieſt was to pronounce upon the people, Numb. vi. 23. 27. Again, at the preſenting of the firſt-fruits, though the heart of the offerer might be filled with gratitude, he was not to expreſs it in his own way, but the Lord himſelf preſcribed the form of his acknowledgment, confeſſion, and prayer. Deut. xxvi. 12—15. But it may be ſaid, theſe were enjoined under the Levitical inſtitution, which is now abrogated, and that we live under a diſpenſation of greater light and liberty. I wiſh however, with all our light and liberty, we could more fully come up to the ſpirit

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of ſome of the devotional parts of the Old Teſtament, which were recorded for our inſtruction, and moſt certainly are not abrogated. The book of Pſalms eſpecially, contains a rich variety of patterns for prayer, if we may not call them forms, adapted to all the various exerciſes of the life of faith. And if when I read or repeat ſuch Pſalms as the 63d, 84th, or 86th, I could feel, in the manner I wiſh, the force of every expreſſion, I ſhould think I prayed to good purpoſe, though I were not to intermingle a ſingle word of my own. So likewiſe with reſpect to that ſummary which our Lord condeſcended to teach his diſciples; though

though I believe it had a peculiar reference to the ſtate in which they were before his paſſion, and while he was ſtill with them; yet agreeable to the fulneſs of his wiſdom, it is ſo comprehenſive, that I apprehend every part of a believer's intercourſe with God in prayer, may be reduced, without forcing, to one or the other of the heads of this prayer. And I ſhould eſteem it a golden hour indeed, one of the happieſt ſeaſons I ever enjoyed in prayer, if I could repeat it with a juſt impreſſion of the meaning of every clauſe. But alas! ſuch are the effects of our unhappy differences, or rather of a wrongneſs of ſpirit in maintaining

ing them, and ſo prone are we to think we cannot be too unlike thoſe whom we are not pleaſed with, that even the words which our Lord himſelf has taught us are depreciated and diſuſed by many, I fear upon no better ground than becauſe they are retained in the uſage of the Church of England. Though beſides giving us a pattern to pray after that manner, He has at leaſt permitted us to uſe it as a form, directing us, *When ye pray* ſay, Our Father which art in heaven, &c. If ſcriptural warrant be required, I think we have one more clear and expreſs for the uſe of this prayer, than can be found for ſome things

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upon which no ſmall ſtreſs is laid by our Diſſenting brethren.

Some perſons might poſſibly alledge, that if the uſe of ſcriptural forms of prayer were admitted, it would plead nothing in favour of ſuch forms as are of human compoſition. But as I believe the more judicious part of the Diſſenters would not make this diſtinction, a few words may ſuffice for an anſwer. Moſt of us when we preach, profeſs to preach *the Word of God*, and I think we are ſufficiently authorized to uſe the expreſſion, ſo far as our ſermons are explanatory of ſcriptural truths, and agreeable to them. For though the ſyſtem of truth

contained in the holy Scriptures has a peculiar authority, as the fountain from whence we are to derive our public diſcourſes, and the ſtandard by which they are to be tried; yet truth, as to its nature, does not admit of degrees, but all propoſitions, if they be true, muſt be equally true, and every concluſion which is *rightly* inferred from ſcriptural premiſes, muſt be, in whatever words it is expreſſed (if they are preciſe and clear,) as true as the premiſes from which it is drawn. If I give a juſt definition or explication of a doctrine of the Bible in my own words, the truth or importance of that doctrine are not affected or weakened

weakened by the vehicle in which I convey it: nor would a hearer have a right to withhold his attention or aſſent, from a pretence that though the propoſition itſelf was true, he was not concerned in it, becauſe I had not expreſſed it in ſcriptural phraſes. It is only upon this ground that the propriety and authority of preaching can be maintained; and the like reaſoning may be applied to prayer. A prayer is ſcriptural if conformable to the promiſes, patterns, and truths of Scripture, though it ſhould not contain one phraſe taken *totidem verbis* from the Bible.

May I not here appeal to the practice of the Diſſenters themſelves? I ſuppoſe Dr. Watts's Hymns, and his imitation of David's Pſalms, eſpecially the latter, are uſed, by a large majority of Diſſenting Congregations, in their public worſhip. Many of theſe pieces are devotional, that is, they are in the ſtrain of prayer, or praiſe. They are, therefore, forms of prayer or praiſe; and when the firſt line is given out, it is probable that ſeveral perſons in the aſſembly, know, beforehand, every word they are to ſing. In ſome congregations the Pſalm or Hymn is delivered line by line, and in moſt, the bulk of the people

people are provided with books. Now it appears to me that when a worſhipper who attends to what is going forward, and is not content with a mere lip ſervice, joins in ſinging verſes, which expreſs the deſires and petitions of his heart, to the Lord, he prays; and if he uſes verſes with which he was before acquainted, he prays by a form. He does the very thing for which we are condemned. Unleſs it can be proved that the fault and evil which is eſſential to a form in proſe, is entirely removed if the ſubſtance of the obnoxious form be expreſſed in metre and chime.

Crito freely will rehearſe
Forms of pray'r and praiſe in verſe:
Why ſhould Crito then ſuppoſe
Forms are ſinful when in proſe?
Muſt my form be deemed a crime
Merely for the want of rhime?

I have heard of a Miniſter who uſed to compoſe hymns in the pulpit. It was his cuſtom to give out one line, and by the time the congregation had ſung the firſt, he had a ſecond ready for them, and ſo on, as long as he thought proper to ſing. Theſe were not forms, they were compoſed *pro re nata*. Before he had finiſhed a ſecond ſtanza, the former (as to the verſe and cadence) was in a manner forgotten; and the ſame hymn was never heard twice.

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I know not what theſe unpremeditated pieces were in point of compoſition: but were I perſuaded of the unlawfulneſs of forms of prayer, and at the ſame time approved of the practice of ſinging in public worſhip; I ſhould extremely covet the talent of extempore hymn-making, as one of the moſt neceſſary gifts a Miniſter could poſſeſs in order to maintain a conſiſtency in his whole ſervice.

I here cloſe what I intended by way of introduction. In my ſubſequent Letters I purpoſe to acquaint you more directly with the reaſons which determined my own choice, and which ſtill ſatisfy me,

that in receiving epiſcopal ordination, and exerciſing my miniſtry in the eſtabliſhed Church I have not acted wrong. At preſent, I ſhall relieve your attention, by ſubſcribing myſelf

Your affectionate Friend
and Brother.

LETTER

LETTER II.

My dear friend and brother,

AS ſuch I addreſs you; as ſuch, notwithſtanding our different views of Church Government, you acknowledge me. You have confirmed your love to me by many repeated proofs, and it is the deſire of my heart, that nothing may take place on either ſide to weaken the exerciſe of that friendſhip, which having the faith and hope of the Goſpel for its baſis, is calculated to ſubſiſt and flouriſh in a better world. With this

this thought upon my mind, it is impoſſible that I ſhould write a ſingle line with an intention of grieving or offending you; and I am perſuaded the ſame conſideration on your part will diſpoſe you to a candid peruſal of what I offer. I had rather be ſilent than plead even for truth in an angry contentious ſpirit. For every year of my life ſtrengthens my conviction of the importance of that divine aphoriſm, The wrath of man worketh not the righteouſneſs of God.

How far what I have ſuggeſted in favour of eſtabliſhments and liturgies, may appear concluſive to you, I know not. I depend much

much upon your candour, but I make allowances for the unavoidable influence of education, connection, and habit, both in you and in myſelf. We generally aſcribe the diſſent of thoſe who differ from us, in part at leaſt, to prejudices of this kind; but as it is very natural to think favourably of ourſelves, we almoſt take it for granted that *we* have either eſcaped or outgrown every bias. Though ſome of the principles we maintain have been inſtilled into us from our childhood, and we have been confirmed in what we ſay is *right*, by the inſtruction, advice, and example of friends, exactly as others have been con-

firmed

firmed in what we call *wrong*; yet that poſitiveneſs, which in them is the effect of ignorant prejudice, is in us a very different thing; a juſt attachment to truth, and the reſult of impartial examination and full conviction. For my own part I dare not ſay that I am free from all bias and prepoſſeſſion, but I deſire and endeavour to guard againſt their influence.

But though I have ventured to defend the propriety of a national eſtabliſhment, and, upon that ground, the expediency of a liturgy, I need not tell you that I had no hand in forming either the one or the other. By the allotment

ment of Divine Providence I was born in a nation where theſe things had taken place long before I came into the world. Therefore when the Lord gave me a deſire to preach his Goſpel, and it became neceſſary to determine under what character I ſhould exerciſe my miniſtry; the queſtion before me was not, What form of Church Government I might propoſe as the moſt ſcriptural, if all parties amongſt us were willing to refer themſelves to my deciſion? But my enquiry was rather directed to this point, What would be my path of duty, *rebus ſic ſtantibus*, living as I did in the iſland of Great Britain, and in that part of it

it named England. At firſt, indeed, I ſaw but little room for deliberation. For about ſix years after I was awakened to ſome concern for my ſoul, my ſituation in life had ſecluded me equally from every religious party. During this period, in which I walked alone, the Lord was pleaſed to ſhew me the way to the throne of grace, and to lead me to ſtudy and prize his holy word. By his bleſſing I made ſome advances in knowledge, though ſlowly, under ſuch diſcouragements and diſadvantages, as they who from the beginning of their enquiries, are favoured with public ordinances, and the help of Chriſtian conference,

ference, can have no proper conception of. At length I became acquainted with ſome of his people, and had frequent opportunities of hearing the Goſpel. My firſt connections of this ſort were chiefly with Diſſenters, and brought me as it were into a new world. For till then I had hardly an idea of the different names and modes, by which profeſſing Chriſtians were diſtinguiſhed and ſubdivided, nor of the animoſity with which their various diſputes were carried on. But as I received benefit and pleaſure from my intercourſe with my new friends, it is no wonder that while my heart was warm, and my experience and

judgment

judgment unformed, I ſhould enter with readineſs into all their views. Thus, together with the real advantages I obtained among them, I imbibed at the ſame time a ſtrong prejudice againſt the eſtabliſhed Church, and haſtily concluded, that though I might occaſionally communicate with it as a private perſon, it would be impoſſible to officiate in it as a Miniſter without violating my conſcience. Accordingly, my firſt overtures were to the Diſſenters; and had not the Providence of God remarkably interpoſed to prevent it, I ſhould probably have been a *brother* with you in every ſenſe. But my deſigns were overruled.

ruled. A variety of doors by which I ſought entrance (for I did not give up upon the firſt diſappointment) were ſucceſſively ſhut againſt me. Theſe repeated delays afforded me more time to think and judge for myſelf; and the more I conſidered the point, the more my ſcruples againſt conformity gave way. Reaſons increaſed upon me, which not only ſatisfied me that I might conform without ſin, but that the preference (as to my own concern) was plainly on that ſide. Accordingly, in the Lord's due time, after ſeveral years waiting to know his will, I ſought, and obtained epiſcopal ordination. And I ſe-

rioufly aſſure you, that though I took this ſtep with a firm perſuaſion that it was right, I did not at that time ſee ſo many reaſons to juſtify my choice, nor perhaps any one reaſon in ſo ſtrong a light, as I have ſince. Far from having regretted this intereſting part of my conduct for a ſingle hour, I have been more ſatisfied with it from year to year. You will pleaſe therefore, to accept what I am about to offer, not merely as an account of the motives which influenced me twenty years ago, but rather as the conſiderations which at this minute call upon me to be heartily thankful to the Lord, for leading me by a way

which

which I knew not, to labour in that part of his vineyard, which experience has proved to be moſt ſuitable for maintaining my perſonal peace and comfort, and (I verily believe likewiſe) for promoting my uſefulneſs as a Miniſter.

Some of our Diſſenting Brethren who I hope are willing to think as well of the awakened Clergy as they can, kindly allow us to be well meaning people; they believe we deſire to be uſeful, and think it not impoſſible but that in ſome inſtances we may be ſo. But they pity us either for not having more light, or for not having courage to follow that light, which they ſuppoſe *muſt*

force itſelf upon us, if we did not wilfully ſhut it out. From what they hear of us they are ſtaggered. They are loth to deny that the Lord is with us at all: but then, if the Lord be with us indeed, why are we thus? It is almoſt unaccountable to them upon this ſuppoſition how we can remain where we are. They are expecting from day to day, that if we are enlightened, as we profeſs, and honeſt men, as they wiſh to find us, we ſhall ſurely come out from Babylon, renounce our ſlavery and will-worſhip, and openly attach ourſelves to the Diſſenting Intereſt. Could we do this, and perſuade our people

people to follow us, they would probably no longer doubt whether the Lord had wrought by our miniſtry, or not.

I could wiſh you not to think of me while you read the paragraph I am now beginning. You know many of our Miniſters, and you know that there are amongſt them men of ſound ſenſe, ſolid judgment, and extenſive reading. Men whom the Lord has been pleaſed to favour with an eminency in gifts and ſpiritual knowledge, in a word, able Miniſters of the New Teſtament. Men, who though in the ſight of the Lord they lie low in the duſt, conſcious of inherent defilement,

and that their beſt ſervices need forgiveneſs; yet with regard to their fellow-creatures, can in the integrity of their hearts appeal to all around them, that their converſation is not unbecoming the Goſpel which they preach. Some of theſe men, at leaſt, have carefully ſtudied the ſubject matter of debate between us and the Diſſenters, have read the books, and conſidered the arguments, which are ſuppoſed ſufficient to convert and reform us; but after all their endeavours to obtain information, though they agree with the evangelical Diſſenters in their views of the Goſpel (which yet they received not from them, but from the

the holy Scripture) they are ſtill conſtrained to differ on the queſtion of Church Form and Order. Now why ſhould this be imputed to their ignorance and blindneſs? Does it require a ſharper eye to perceive the preciſe delineation of a Goſpel Church in the New Teſtament, if it be really there, than to apprehend and embrace what the Scripture teaches concerning the perſon and characters of the Redeemer, the way of a ſinner's acceptance, or the nature of the life of faith? Theſe things, we are aſſured by the Apoſtle, the natural man, however qualified, cannot diſcern. Surely the external form of a Goſpel Church

cannot be equally myſterious with theſe doctrines! eſpecially as it is profeſſedly ſeen with the glance of an eye, by ſome perſons who declare themſelves enemies to myſteries of any kind. Or why ſhould their not acceding to you be imputed to intereſted motives? There are with us men whoſe integrity and ingenuouſneſs are in every other reſpect unimpeachable; and it is hard, that without ſufficient evidence, they ſhould be charged with prevarication in a buſineſs which concerns the honour of their Saviour, and the uprightneſs of their conſciences in his ſight! Beſides, what can be the powerful motives for ſuch hypocriſy?

pocriſy? Do they by remaining in the eſtabliſhment avoid the offence of the croſs, and find a ſhelter from that *opprobrium* and oppoſition which muſt be their lot if they had the fortitude to unite with the Diſſenters? Here at leaſt, however we may be miſtaken, I apprehend the Lord has aſſigned to *us* the poſt of honour; and that in the treatment we meet with from an unbelieving world, our lot rather reſembles that of the Diſſenters of the laſt century than of the preſent. It is true we are no more expoſed to fines and impriſonment than you are, but if it be an honour to ſuffer ſhame for his name-ſake, I think *we* have

have the pre-eminence. As to money-matters, I could name ſeveral of our Clergy, who are not ſo plentifully provided for in the eſtabliſhment, but that if they were to leave us, and to go over to your ſide, it is very probable the manner in which converts of ſuch characters and abilities would be received amongſt you, might prove conſiderably to their emolument. Nor can it upon better grounds be aſcribed to obſtinate prejudice and incurable bigotry, that your arguments do not prevail. For it is well known that many of our Miniſters ſhew a cordial and liberal ſpirit to the Diſſenters, receive them gladly into

into their houſes, attend occaſionally upon their preaching, recommend and encourage applications for the ſupport of their Miniſters, or places of worſhip, and are ready to concur with them in every plan for uſefulneſs. And I believe this diſpoſition would be more general, had not experience ſhewn that the candor of ſome Clergymen in theſe reſpects, has been too often improperly requited by ungenerous attempts to prejudice and perplex our people, and to weaken our hands.

Yet one or other, or all theſe charges muſt be inſinuated againſt us, rather than fallible men will ſuppoſe themſelves any thing leſs than infallible,

infallible, even in points of a circumſtantial nature; and though others whom they have no reaſon to think inferior to themſelves either in judgment or integrity, are compelled to differ from them.

> If not ſo frequent, would not this be ſtrange?
> That 'tis ſo frequent—this is ſtranger ſtill!

Be aſſured, dear Sir, that in thus apologizing for my brethren, I write not only without their deſire, but without their knowledge. I think I have now finiſhed all my preambles, and I proceed immediately to acquaint you with my reaſons for conform-

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ing to the Eſtabliſhed Church, and continuing in it.

My firſt and principal reaſon, is, THE REGARD I OWE TO THE HONOUR AND AUTHORITY OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST, AS HEAD AND LAWGIVER OF HIS CHURCH. I do not mean that this conſideration obliges me abſolutely to prefer the form of the Church of England to any other form, but only that it will not permit me to join with thoſe who make diſſenting from it neceſſary in point of conſcience.

I cannot ſuppoſe that any true Chriſtian in our land of light and liberty will heſitate a moment to acknowledge that Chriſt is the

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one infallible, authoritative Legiſlator and Governor of his Church, that He is the Lord, and the only Lord of conſcience; that nothing inconſiſtent with his revealed will ſhould be practiſed, nothing that he has enjoined be omitted by thoſe who profeſs allegiance to him. But however generally acknowledged theſe principles are, I believe the miſconſtruction and miſapplication of them, have contributed more to divide the people of God, and to alienate their affections from each other, than any other cauſe that can be aſſigned. It ſeems reaſonable to expect that they whoſe hopes are built upon the ſame foun-

foundation, who are led by the ſame ſpirit, who are oppoſed by the ſame enemies, and intereſted in the ſame promiſes, would look upon each other with mutual complacence, would love as brethren, would bear each other's burdens, and ſo fulfil their Maſter's law, and copy his example. But, alas! a miſtaken zeal for his honour fills them on all ſides with animoſity againſt their fellow diſciples, ſplits them into a thouſand parties, gives riſe to fierce and endleſs contentions, and makes them ſo earneſt for and againſt their reſpective peculiarities, that the love, which is the diſcriminating characteriſtic of His religion,

gion, is ſcarcely to be found amongſt them in ſuch a degree of exerciſe, as to ſatisfy even candid obſervers whether they bear his mark, or not.

The viſible Church of Chriſt comprizes all who call themſelves by his name, and who profeſs to receive his Goſpel as a Divine Revelation. It is a floor on which the grain and the chaff are promiſcuouſly mingled; a field in which the wheat and the tares grow together; a net incloſing a multitude of fiſhes both good and bad. But the viſible Church of Chriſt taken in this large extent, is not the proper ſubject of his government, as He is the King of Saints.

Saints. For his kingdom is a ſpiritual kingdom which none can underſtand, and his rule is a ſpiritual rule, which none can receive or obey, until born from above, and made new creatures by the power of the Holy Spirit. If theſe regenerated perſons, who it is to be feared are ſeldom the largeſt number in any denomination, be conſidered as detached from the viſible Church, the remainder is a mere *caput mortuum*, differenced from the world, which lies in wickedneſs, in nothing but a name, and in the privilege of having the oracles of God committed to it. But nominal Chriſtians, though they have or may have in their hands the

Scriptures, which are able to make ſinners wiſe unto ſalvation, are no leſs diſtant and alienated from the life of God (until he is pleaſed to reveal his power in their hearts) than Mahomedans or heathens. And with reſpect to theſe, the honour of the Lord Jeſus Chriſt is but little concerned with the different ways in which they may think proper to conſtitute themſelves into national or particular Churches, and pleaſe themſelves with a lifeleſs form of worſhip, while their hearts are in a ſtate of enmity to his grace. Admitting that the plan of a Goſpel Church was deſcribed with the ſame preciſion in the New Teſtament, as the inſtitutions of the Levitical

worſhip

worſhip in the Old; and punctually complied with to the minuteſt circumſtance; though the worſhippers might applaud and admire their own exactneſs, and cenſure and deſpiſe all who differed a hair's-breadth from them; yet if they did not ſerve God in ſpirit and in truth, their boaſted Church-order would avail them nothing. All that related to the worſhip of God under the law was confeſſedly of divine appointment, and the people in the time of the prophets, were not ſo much charged with neglecting the preſcribed forms, as with reſting in them. When this evil became general, and they thought to

compenſate for their want of ſpirituality, by their feaſts, faſts, and ſacrifices, the Lord expreſſes himſelf as diſpleaſed with his own inſtitutions. Iſa. i. 11—15. and ch. lxvi. 3, 4. Jer. vii. 8—14. 22, 23. They could plead his preſcription for their obſervances, but in vain they truſted to the temple, and ſaid, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are we, when the Lord of the temple was departed from them. And certainly he will be no more pleaſed with a form without the heart *now*, than he was *then*.

I muſt therefore confine my enquiry to the Church of Chriſt in a more limited and proper ſenſe;

ſenſe; as expreſſive of his myſtical body compoſed of all who by faith are united to him as their foundation and root, of all to whom he is the head of vital influence, who have fellowſhip with him in his death, and are partakers of the power of his reſurrection. Theſe are infallibly known only to himſelf. They are ſcattered far and wide, ſeparated from each other by ſeas and mountains; they are a people of many nations and languages. But wherever their lot is caſt, they hear his voice, are under his gracious eye, and the life which they live in the fleſh is by faith in his name. They have not all equal

degrees of light or meaſures of grace, nor are they all favoured with equal advantages for knowing or enjoying the full extent of the liberty of the Goſpel. But they are all accepted in the beloved and approved of God. They are ſpiritual worſhippers, joint partakers of grace, and will hereafter appear together at their Saviour's right-hand in glory.

At preſent they are in an imperfect ſtate. Though created anew in Chriſt Jeſus, they are not freed from a principle of indwelling ſin. Their knowledge is clouded by much remaining ignorance, and their zeal, though right in its aim, is often warped

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and miſguided by the corrupt influence of ſelf. For they ſtill have many corruptions, and they live in a world which furniſhes frequent occaſions of exciting them; and Satan, their ſubtle and powerful enemy, is always upon his watch to miſlead and enſnare them. They are born, educated, and called under a great variety of circumſtances. Habits of life, local cuſtoms, early connections, and even bodily conſtitution, have more or leſs influence in forming their characters, and in giving a tincture and turn to their manner of thinking. So that though, in whatever is eſſential to their peace and holineſs, they are all led by

the ſame ſpirit, and mind the ſame things; in others of a ſecondary nature their ſentiments may, and often do differ, as much as the features of their faces. A uniformity of judgment among them is not to be expected while the wiſeſt are defective in knowledge, the beſt are defiled with ſin, and while the weakneſſes of human nature which are common to them all, are ſo differently affected by a thouſand impreſſions which ariſe from their various ſituations. They might, however, maintain a unity of ſpirit, and live in the exerciſe of mutual love; were it not that every party, and almoſt every individual unhappily

happily conceives that they are bound in conſcience to preſcribe their own line of conduct as a ſtandard to which all their brethren ought to conform. They are comparatively but few who conſider this requiſition to be as unneceſſary, unreaſonable, and impracticable, as it would be to inſiſt, or expect, that every man's ſhoes ſhould be exactly of one ſize.

Thus, though all agree in aſſerting the authority and right of the Lord Jeſus, as King and Head of his Church, the various apprehenſions they frame of the rule to which he requires them to conform, and their pertinacious attach-

attachment to their own expoſi-
tions of it, ſeparate them almoſt
as much from each other, as if
they were not united to him by a
principle of living faith. Their
little differences form them into
ſo many ſeparate intereſts; and
the heat with which they defend
their own plans, and oppoſe all
who cannot agree with them to a
tittle, makes them forget that
they are children in the ſame fami-
ly, and ſervants of the ſame maſter.
And while they vex and worry
each other with diſputations and
cenſures, the world wonders and
laughs at them all. The ſpirit of
love is reſtrained, offences are
multiplied, and Satan is gratified
by

by beholding the extenſive effects of his pernicious and long practiſed maxim, *Divide & impera.*

I am far from ſuppoſing that all the various modes of Church Government under which ſpiritual worſhippers are caſt, are equally agreeable to the ſpirit and genius of the Goſpel, or equally ſuited to the purpoſes of edification. Perhaps there is no conſiderable body of people who profeſs themſelves Chriſtians, however erroneous in their plans of doctrine or worſhip, among whom the Saviour has not ſome hidden ones, known to himſelf, though loſt to human obſervation in the crowd of pretenders

which

which ſurround them. The power of his grace can break through all diſadvantages, and make a few individuals wiſer than their teachers, by revealing his truth to their heart, ſooner or later, ſo far as is neceſſary to ſalvation. But it muſt be owned that ſome communities which bear the name of Chriſtian have departed ſo very far from the ſimplicity of the Goſpel, that if we reaſon *a priori* we are ready to conclude it is almoſt impoſſible for a converted perſon to continue a ſingle day in ſuch a communion. But hypotheſis cannot be maintained againſt plain facts. Thus the Church of Rome, not merely by

by adopting an unmeaning burdenſome train of ceremonies, but by her doctrines of papal infallibility, invocation of ſaints and angels, purgatory, abſolution, the maſs, and others of the like ſtamp, is become ſo exceedingly adulterated, that poſſibly ſome perſons who may read theſe letters will form an unfavourable opinion of me, for declaring that I have not the leaſt doubt but the Lord Jeſus has had from age to age a ſucceſſion of choſen and faithful witneſſes within the pale of that corrupt Church. Yet I ſhould hope that they, who having themſelves taſted that the Lord is gracious, know the language of a heart

heart under the influence of his Spirit, would, in defiance of Proteſtant prejudices, be of my mind, if they had opportunity of peruſing the writings of ſome Papiſts. If ſuch perſons as De Fenelon, Paſchall, Quenell, and Nicole, (to mention no more,) were not true Chriſtians, where ſhall we find any who deſerve the name? In the writings of theſe great men, notwithſtanding incidental errors, I meet with ſuch ſtrains of experimental godlineſs, ſuch deep knowledge of the workings of the Spirit of God and of the heart of man, and ſuch maſterly explications of many important paſſages of Scripture, as might do honour

to

to the moſt enlightened Proteſtant. And yet theſe men lived and died in the popiſh communion, and to their lateſt hours (for any thing that appears to the contrary) thought they could not ſeparate from it without ſin. And, though I have not equal means of information, I can as little doubt that the Lord has a people likewiſe in the Greek Church, which, as to its external frame, ſeems to be little leſs unſcriptural than the Church of Rome itſelf.

However, I deſire to be thankful that I am not a Papiſt. I am at leaſt one ſtep nearer to the true and acceptable worſhip of God. For I believe the moſt rigid of

our

our Diſſenting brethren will allow, that the Church of England if *almoſt*, yet is not *altogether* ſo depraved and corrupt in its conſtitution as the Church of Rome. I am now in my track, and ſhall trouble you with fewer digreſſions in the ſequel. My next point will be to examine the different claims of *Proteſtant* Churches, to the honour they all aſſume, that their reſpective inſtitutions are moſt conformable to the rules the apoſtles have laid down on the ſubject of Church Government, and expreſs the greateſt regard to the authority of the Lord Jeſus Chriſt, the undoubted Head and Lawgiver of his Church. And to

avoid

avoid, as much as I can, encumbering what I write in an epiſtolary way to a friend, with the ſtiffneſs of argumentation, I ſhall content myſelf with giving you a ſimple account of what occurred to me upon this head, when I made the enquiry for my own direction. But it is time to conclude this letter by aſſuring you that I am,

Your affectionate Friend.

LETTER III.

My dear friend and brother,

IF the authority of men truly reſpectable for learning, judgment, and grace were ſufficient to determine the queſtion, Which of the various forms of Church Government now obtaining among Chriſtians, is moſt agreeable to the letter and ſpirit of the New Teſtament? a modeſt enquirer, who wiſhes for the ſanction of thoſe whom he eſteems wiſer and better than himſelf, would probably without heſitation join himſelf

ſelf to that party to which he might be firſt led to apply for direction. For whatever difference there may be in the merit of their ſeveral claims for pre-eminence, the claim itſelf is made with an equal degree of confidence by them all. At a time when I was very ſenſible of my own incompetency to decide this point for myſelf, I received (as I hope) much benefit from the writings of Biſhop Hall, Reynolds, Davenant, Mr. Hooker, and other Divines of the Church of England. I perceived they were perſons of ſtrong ſenſe, extenſive literature, ſound in the faith; and from ſuch accounts of their lives as I could collect, I

judged they had been zealous and diligent in their callings, and burning and ſhining lights in the world. I could not perceive that any of them were diſſatisfied with the eſtabliſhed Church, in which they lived and died; and ſome of them I found were very ſtrenuous in its defence, not only pleading that it was lawful to maintain communion with it, but offering many arguments to prove that it was even ſinful to ſeparate from it, and that it was the only reſemblance of the primitive apoſtolical Church. I own to you, that I thought ſome of their aſſertions upon this head were too ſtrong, and ſome of their arguments

ments not fully concluſive. Yet I was a little ſtaggered, and it gave me pain to be forced to differ in any point from men whom I believed to have been full of faith and of the Holy Ghoſt. However, ſome general idea I poſſeſſed of the liberty of the Goſpel, a conviction that the Lord had a people and a work in other countries where the form of the Church of England could not take place, and the previous attachment I had to the Diſſenters, with whom, as I have ſaid, I was firſt acquainted, prevented me from becoming what is called a High Churchman. But as for theſe reaſons I could not give the Church of

England an excluſive preference, or think myſelf authoriſed to brand thoſe who diſſented from it with the hard names of Schiſmatics and Fanatics; ſo on the other hand, I could not go into the oppoſite extreme, or ſuppoſe that a Church in which the Lord employed and owned ſuch valuable men, and had a numerous ſpiritual people, was no better than a Babylon, from whence all who loved his name and ſalvation, were in duty and conſcience bound to withdraw.

Many books likewiſe came in my way written by Divines of the Church of Scotland. In the writings of Durham, Fleming, Haly-

Halyburton, and others, I found proofs that they were not inferior in light, holineſs, and a ſound ſpiritual judgment to the moſt eminent luminaries of our own Church. In what concerned the life and power of religion I could perceive no conſiderable difference between them. As they were all taught by the ſame Spirit, ſo they were all teachers of the ſame truths. But in their ſentiments upon Church Government they differed very widely. Wherein they agreed I could fully agree with them. Wherein they differed I was left in the uncertainty of a traveller who, enquiring his way of two perſons, is

told by one to turn to the right, and by the other directly oppoſite, to the left. My Engliſh guides would perſuade me that the form of the Church from the apoſtles days was epiſcopal. My Scotch guides were rather more poſitive that our prelacy was almoſt equally with the papacy, a branch and a mark of Antichriſt. If I compared the ſufficiency of each to decide for me, I knew not which to prefer. On both ſides were men of wiſdom and grace, and who I believed would not wilfully miſlead me; on both ſides they confeſſed themſelves in general to be like myſelf, fallible and liable to miſtake. Only in this

this one point both ſides appeared confident that they could not be miſtaken, and yet their opinions were not only diverſe but contradictory.

The ſuſpenſe in which I was held by theſe incompatible claimants, ſent me more readily and attentively to renew my enquiries amongſt my former friends of your denomination. By theſe I was inſtructed that I need not trouble myſelf with weighing and comparing the arguments which the Engliſh and Scotch Churches had to offer in favour of their reſpective conſtitutions, for they were both equally deſtitute of any foundation in truth or Scripture.

That

That I had only to read the New Teſtament for myſelf, and it muſt appear very plain, that the Lord Chriſt had not left a concern of this importance undetermined, but had directed his apoſtles to leave in their writings a pattern, according to which it was his pleaſure all his Churches in future ages ſhould be formed. That the firſt Churches were congregational or independent, and that every other plan was unſcriptural, and a preſumptuous deviation from the declared will of the Lord. As I had been a debtor to ſome of *their* writers likewiſe, and was perſonally acquainted with ſeveral of their Miniſters, their repreſentations

ſentations had ſo much weight with me as to increaſe my embarraſſment.

My difficulties grew upon me when I found by conſulting different independent writers, who had profeſſedly treated this ſubject, that though they were of one mind in aſſerting that a plain and ſatisfactory pattern for this congregational order, might be eaſily collected and ſtated from a peruſal of the New Teſtament; yet when they came to delineate and deſcribe it according to their own idea, they were far from being agreed among themſelves, as to the nature and number of the officers, powers, and acts, which are requiſite

quiſite to the conſtitution and adminiſtration of a regularly organiſed Goſpel Church. I formerly employed much time and attention in this diſquiſition; but not having for many years paſt reviewed a controverſy which I think rather dry and unintereſting, I cannot from memory enter into a detail of particulars. Nor is it needful. Of the fact, I think I may be confident, that there is not ſuch an agreement amongſt them, as might be expected, if the plan from which they all profeſs to copy was clearly and expreſsly revealed in the New Teſtament, as obligatory upon all Chriſtians. Here I was

at

at a loſs again; for if I could have admitted their principle, That every circumſtance of worſhip and government in a Church ought to have the warrant of a precept or a precedent from the Scripture; ſtill I needed help to digeſt and put together the ſeveral regulations which were diſperſed in ſo many different parts of the Goſpels and Epiſtles, for I found myſelf unable to frame the detached materials into one orderly ſtructure by my own ſkill. But when they who profeſſed to have the light which I wanted, were themſelves divided upon the point, I was precluded from the hope of any certain aſſiſtance;

for as to probabilities and conjectures, I might as well depend upon my own, as upon thoſe of another.

Nor was this the whole of my difficulty. I was honeſtly adviſed to read and examine for myſelf. I did ſo, and it appeared to me by comparing what I read with what I ſaw, that the Independants could not, at leaſt, did not keep cloſely to their own principles. I thought I met with uſages in the Churches planted by the apoſtles, which did not obtain in any of the congregational Churches I was acquainted with. And on the other hand, I noticed ſome uſages among theſe of which I could find

no

no traces in the inſpired account we have of the Primitive Churches: Permit me, by way of ſpecimen, to mention one inſtance in each kind. If it was neceſſary I could mention ſeveral, but I wiſh not to be tedious.

The Apoſtle Paul addreſſes the Corinthians as a Church of Chriſt, and we have from him a larger and more particular account of the practices of their Church than of any other. In ch. xiv. of his Firſt Epiſtle, after cenſuring and correcting ſome improprieties which had obtained in their public aſſemblies, he gives them this direction. *Let the prophets ſpeak two or three, and let the other*

judge. If any thing be revealed to another that ſitteth by, let the firſt hold his peace. For ye may all prophecy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted. The general practice of congregational Churches in our time, ſeems not to comply with this apoſtolic injunction. I think, my friend, in your aſſemblies, eſpecially in your ſolemn ſtated worſhip on the Lord's-day, there is ſeldom more than one ſpeaker. The ſame Miniſter who preaches, uſually begins and ends the ſervice. Should it be pleaded that the apoſtle ſpeaks of propheſying, and evidently ſuppoſes that the Church of Corinth was favoured with

with extraordinary gifts and revelations which are now ceaſed, and that therefore the rule cannot in that reſpect extend to us; I have two anſwers to make.

In the firſt place, though we do not expect extraordinary revelations, we have encouragement to hope for the preſence of our Saviour, and the gracious influences of his Spirit, when we meet in his name, ſufficient to enable us to ſpeak to his praiſe, and to the edification and comfort of our brethren, if not in foreign tongues, at leaſt in our own. And it is probable that you have more than once been a hearer in a public aſſembly, when your

heart has been ſo warmed and impreſſed with the truths of the Goſpel, that you would not have been unwilling to have aſcended the pulpit yourſelf, either to confirm or correct what you had been hearing, or to indulge the liberty you found in your mind upon ſome other important ſubject. Perhaps ſomething was *then revealed to you*, which might have been very ſuitable to the occaſion, and to the ſtate of the congregation. Why did you not then declare it? Why did you neglect to ſtir up the gift of God that was in you? Would it have been contrary to the cuſtom of your Churches? But would you not

not upon your principles, have been juſtified by the cuſtom of a New Teſtament Church, and the injunction of an apoſtle?

But, ſecondly, and chiefly, I anſwer, If it be admitted that becauſe the Primitive Churches had extraordinary gifts, there are ſome things in their practice, which are not proper for our * imitation, who have not the ſame gifts; then I quite give up the hope of being able to determine the exact and invariable form of a Church, by ſuch lights as the Acts of the Apoſtles, and their Epiſtles afford me; unleſs ſome man or ſet of men be

* See Neale's Hiſtory of the Puritans, Vol. I. page 379. Second edition. 1732.

qualified and commiſſioned to draw the line for me, and to ſhew me diſtinctly how far, and in what inſtances, the ſtate of the firſt Chriſtians is limited from being a pattern to us, by the extraordinary diſpenſations of that age; and how far, and in what caſes, their pattern is binding upon us ſtill, notwithſtanding thoſe diſpenſations have long ſince ceaſed. To be directed to ſtudy theſe Churches as a model, and to be told at the ſame time, that ſome parts of their practice were not deſigned for the imitation of future ages, without diſtinctly ſpecifying which were, and which were not, is rather the way to perplex

perplex and bewilder an enquirer, than to help him to information. Upon this ground though I might refuſe to truſt the aſſumed infallibility of the Pope, I muſt feel the need of an infallible viſible guide to reſide ſomewhere in the Church, for without ſuch aſſiſtance I could not take a ſingle ſtep with certainty, but muſt be liable to ſtumble at the very threſhold of my enquiry.

I think it is the uſual practice in your Churches to require from all perſons, who wiſh to be admitted into your communion, an account, either verbal or written, of what is called their experience; in which not only a declaration of

their faith in the Lord Jeſus, and their purpoſe, by grace, to devote themſelves to him is expected, but likewiſe a recital of the ſteps by which they were led to a knowledge and profeſſion of the Goſpel. I ſelect this as one inſtance in which I conceive you have neither precept nor precedent in the Scripture for your warrant. A profeſſion of faith in the Lord Jeſus Chriſt, of acceptance of him and ſubmiſſion to him in his offices and characters, ſupported by the evidence of a Goſpel Converſation, ſhould, I apprehend, be deemed ſufficient to entitle a perſon to Church-memberſhip; and eſpecially by thoſe

thoſe who ſo loudly inſiſt upon the evil of ſuper-adding any regulations to thoſe which are already provided by our Lord and his apoſtles. The authority which makes it a pre-requiſite for admiſſion, that a perſon ſhall relate how and when he was awakened, what exerciſes of mind he has paſſed through, and other particulars of a like nature, appears to me to be as merely human, as the authority which preſcribes the canons of an eſtabliſhed Church. If the practice be defenſible, it muſt be on the plea of expediency. It is not my preſent buſineſs to enquire how far it may be expedient for young converts, for

young perſons, eſpecially for young women, to be compelled to ſpeak before a public aſſembly; or if that be diſpenſed with for the ſake of other interfering expediencies, how far it is expedient to truſt to a *written* experience: otherwiſe I could ſay a good deal upon this head. But it is ſufficient for my purpoſe, if no ſhadow of this practice can be found in the New Teſtament. On the contrary, I read that when Saul, after he eſcaped from Damaſcus, eſſayed to join himſelf to the diſciples, it was Barnabas, and not * Saul himſelf, who informed them both of his converſion, and

* See Dr. Guyſe on Acts ix. 27.

of

of the extraordinary manner in which it was effected, ſubjoining a teſtimony of his conduct from the time he had profeſſed a change. But if expediency may warrant a meaſure in your Churches, not expreſsly commanded, why not likewiſe in ours? Be it either right or wrong in one caſe, it muſt be ſo in both. And therefore my remark on this particular will at leaſt have the force of *argumentum ad hominem*.

I am afraid I ſhall weary you by only giving a brief account of the long and intricate road which I travelled, to diſcover, if I could, the beſt conſtituted Church. But I muſt intreat your patience a

little

little longer, till I bring you to the end of my journey. It may be neceſſary to inform ſome of my readers, though not you, that a conſiderable part of the congregational Churches differ from the reſt, with reſpect to the mode and ſubjects of baptiſm. At the time when my thoughts were moſt engaged about Church-order, I lived in intimate habits of friendſhip with ſeveral Baptiſts, who were very willing to aſſiſt me in ſettling my judgment. Theſe, though they would have been pleaſed to ſee me yield to the arguments of their Pœdo-baptiſt brethren, would not be ſatisfied that I ſhould ſtop where they ſtopped. They urged

urged Scripture precepts and precedents to lead me farther; and ſaid, that none of the congregational Churches but their own were agreeable to the mind of Chriſt. They told me that though I ſhould acknowledge and embrace the congregational order, which undoubtedly was the only one countenanced by Scripture, ſtill I could not be right till I had renounced what I called the baptiſm I had received in my infancy, and ſubmitted (as they termed it) to baptiſm by immerſion, to which I was bound not only by the practice of the Primitive Church, but by the example of our Lord himſelf, who, when

he

he was baptized, ſaid for our inſtruction, Thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteouſneſs.

I own, Sir, that if I had ſeen it my duty to accede to the Church order of the Independents, I know not but their principles would have led me from them again, to join with the Baptiſts. How they, who, maintaining infant-baptiſm, preſs Scripture precedent ſo ſtrongly upon me, anſwer the Baptiſts, who in this point preſs it as ſtrongly upon themſelves, is not my concern. I did not ſtand upon the ſame ground, and therefore the arguments of the Baptiſts did not much affect me. I thought the example of our Lord pleaded as much

much for circumciſion as for baptiſm. I queſtioned whether I, a poor ſinner, had any call to imitate him in thoſe things which it became him as our ſurety to perform, in order *to fulfil all righteouſneſs*. It appeared to me that John's Baptiſm and the Chriſtian Baptiſm were different, and though the Baptiſts aſſured me that they were the ſame, I was not convinced. I thought they were plainly diſtinguiſhed in Acts xix. 2—5. and I was grieved by the attempts of ſome wiſe and good men to wreſt a ſenſe from that paſſage, ſo contrary to its plain and obvious meaning, merely to ſupport a favourite ſcheme. And

as

as the form of Chriſtian baptiſm is laid down in expreſs words, Matt. xxviii. 19. I muſt continue to think it different from the baptiſm of John, till I can have ſufficient proof that John baptized our Saviour in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghoſt.

I found likewiſe that the Baptiſts, though unanimous againſt us, and even againſt thoſe, who in every point but one agree with them, were divided among themſelves. Some of them, while they practiſe what *they* think a duty, do not ſo peremptorily preſcribe it to others, as to make it an indiſpenſable term of communion;

munion; but they will receive a perſon as a Church-member whom they judge to be ſound in the faith, and of a good converſation, though they conſider him in ſtrictneſs of ſpeech as unbaptized. But others are much hurt by this conceſſion, and bear teſtimony againſt it as unſcriptural and wrong. *Their* views are ſo ſtrict, that if they certainly knew that a perſon who wiſhed to communicate with them, was the moſt eminent Chriſtian in the land; unleſs he was likewiſe baptized in their manner, they could not, they durſt not admit him to the Lord's table, to eat of that bread and to drink of that cup which is

by

by his command and appointment, the privilege and portion of all believers. This difference of judgment between them has been thought ſo important, that the reaſons for and againſt, and their mutual cenſures of each other, have been laid before the public, by good men on each ſide of the queſtion.

Now, my dear friend, upon this ſtate of the caſe, what could I do? I had reviewed and compared the ſentiments of a number of reſpectable writers and Miniſters of different names. In eſſentials I agreed with them all, and in circumſtantials I differed no more from any of them, than they

differed

differed among themſelves. They all confeſſed they were fallible, yet they all decided with an air of infallibility. For they all in their turns expected me to unite with them, if I had any regard to the authority and honour of the Lord Jeſus as head of the Church. But the very conſideration they propoſed reſtrained me from uniting with any of them. For I cannot think that I ſhould honour the head-ſhip and kingly office of Chriſt, by acknowledging him as the head of a party and ſub-diviſion of his people to the excluſion of the reſt. Every party uſes fair ſounding words of liberty, but when an explanation is made,

it amounts to little more than this—that they will give me liberty to think as they think, and to act as they act; which to me, who claim the ſame right of thinking for myſelf, and of acting according to the dictates of my own conſcience, is no liberty at all. I therefore came to ſuch concluſions as theſe—that I would love them all—that I would hold a friendly intercourſe with them all, ſo far as they ſhould providentially come in my way; but that I would ſtand faſt in the liberty with which Chriſt had made me free; and call none of them maſter——in fine, that if others ſought to honour him by laying a great

great ſtreſs on matters of doubtful diſputation; my way of honouring him ſhould be by endeavouring to ſhew that his kingdom is not of this world, nor conſiſts in meats and drinks, in pleading for forms and parties, but in righteouſneſs, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghoſt; and that neither circumciſion is any thing, nor uncircumciſion, but a new creature, and the faith which worketh by love. There was a time when I could have joined with the Diſſenters, if the Providence of God had opened my way to them; but farther experience and obſervation have ſo far altered my judgment, that had I my choice

to make again, it ſeems to me, that I could no more officiate as a Miniſter among any people who inſiſt upon other terms of communion than thoſe which our Lord has appointed, faith and holineſs, than I could ſubſcribe to the dogmas of the Council of Trent. My regard to his honour will not allow me to exclude any, whom I believe he has been pleaſed to receive. Thus much for the firſt reaſon of my conformity. Yet in juſtice to the Nonconformiſts I muſt add, that if I wiſhed to avail myſelf of the ſanction of great names, I could mention ſome among them, who if they were now living, I am perſuaded

ſuaded would not blame me for conforming, though they could not in conſcience do it themſelves. Particularly I judge thus (from many of his writings) of the truly great Mr. Howe, whoſe praiſe is in all the Churches.

I am ſincerely Yours—

LETTER IV.

My dear friend and brother,

I HAVE given you the chief Reaſon why I am not a Diſſenter. And it appears to me a ſufficient one, though I could aſſign no other. I have, however, two or three more to offer you, but I hope to compriſe them all within the compaſs of this Letter. For indeed I begin to be weary of a ſubject which is not quite ſuitable to my taſte and inclination. But it ſeems not unſeaſonable, and I hope may not be unuſeful

uſeful to ſhew you that the preference I have given to the Church of England, is not the effect either of inconſideration or prejudice.

My ſecond Reaſon for not being a Diſſenter is, BECAUSE I HIGHLY VALUE THE RIGHT OF PRIVATE JUDGMENT, AND MY LIBERTY AS A MAN AND AS A CHRISTIAN. Here again I think we are agreed in principle. You rejoice in the name of a Proteſtant Diſſenter, as ſetting you free from the ſhackles and impoſitions of men; and probably think of me and my brethren in the eſtabliſhment, with a degree of friendly pity; taking it for granted that the engagements

we are under hold us in a painful ſtate of ſubjection and bondage, from which you charitably wiſh to ſee us releaſed.

We are obliged to perſons of your candid diſpoſition for your ſympathy and good wiſhes; and we repay you in kind. As we cannot think exactly alike, this ſeems the beſt method we can take. Harſh cenſures and angry diſputations, would be unbecoming our profeſſion, and hurtful to our ſpirits; but it can do us no harm to pity and pray for each other. Perhaps you are ready to ſay, "You would ſurely pity me "if you knew all my inward "and outward trials, but you

"need

" need not pity me for being a " Diſſenter, becauſe I account it " my great privilege." I may ſay the ſame with the alteration of one word. If you knew the evils which I feel within, and the ſnares and difficulties which beſet me from without, you would pity me indeed. But that I exerciſe my miniſtry in the Church of England appears to me, as things ſtand, to be rather a ſubject for congratulation than compaſſion. I cannot become a Diſſenter till I am weary of my liberty. If you pleaſe we will compare notes upon this head.

Let me firſt ſpeak of the reſtraints *we* are under. I am bound,

bound, by my ſubſcription, to the forms and rubric of the Common-prayer; but my ſubſcription was really *ex animo*. I approve the ſervice, and therefore it is no burden to me to uſe it. I do not conſider it as faultleſs, nor can I ſubſcribe to any book of human compoſition in the ſame abſolute manner as I would to the Bible. But by aſſenting to our Church-ritual I give up leſs of my own private judgment for the ſake of peace, than I ſhould by eſpouſing the rules and practices of any Diſſenting Churches I am acquainted with. Again, having accepted a deſignation to the cure of ſouls, my public miniſtry is thereby confined

confined to Pariſh Churches, and I cannot, conſiſtently with what I conceive to be the import of my voluntary engagements, preach at random and in all places without reſerve. But this is no reſtraint upon my conſcience. While I have the examples of our Lord and his Apoſtles in my view I cannot doubt the lawfulneſs of preaching on mountains or plains, in market-places, or on the ſea-ſhore. But things in themſelves lawful are not always or to all perſons expedient. I approve of parochial order. I interfere not with the conduct of others, but believe it is upon the whole beſt for *me* to confine myſelf to the duties

duties of my own charge, and to ſuch opportunities of preaching in parochial pulpits as may occaſionally offer. Between the one and the other I have ſufficient employment. And though the Biſhop who ordained me laid me under no reſtrictions, I would not have applied to him for ordination, if I had not been previouſly determined to ſubmit to his authority and to the rules of the Church. I thought and ſtill think it my duty to preſerve a conſiſtency of character, for I was not ordained to be an Apoſtle or Evangeliſt, to ſpread the Goſpel throughout a kingdom, but to take care of the particular flock committed to my charge.

charge. But I need not enlarge upon this point, as I think the Diſſenters do not in general by their practice countenance what we call irregularity, but are almoſt as ſeldom ſeen preaching in the fields or by the way-ſides, as the moſt regular of our Clergy; though they cannot plead our reaſons for not doing it, and are certainly not reſtrained either by the precepts or precedents of the New Teſtament.

Nor am I under any diſagreeable conſtraint from my ſuperiors in the Church. The Archdeacon in his diſtrict, and the Biſhop in his dioceſe, hold their reſpective viſitations. The former annually, the

the latter once in three years; at theſe viſitations the Clergy (eſpecially in the country) are expected to attend. On theſe occaſions we anſwer to our names, hear a ſermon or a charge, and uſually dine together. There is nothing painful to me in paying theſe tokens of reſpect to my acknowledged ſuperiors, and receiving marks of civility from them. At all other times, while we keep within the limits which I have already told you I ſubſcribed and conſented to *ex animo*, we ſcarcely know, at leaſt we do not feel that we have any ſuperiors. So far as I am concerned, I have reaſon to acknowledge that the adminiſtra-

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tion of our Church-government is gentle and liberal. I have from the firſt preached my ſentiments with the greateſt freedom. I always acted in the pariſhes which I have ſerved according to my own judgment; and I have done ſome things which have not the ſanction of general cuſtom; but I never met with the ſmalleſt check, interference, or mark of diſpleaſure from any of my ſuperiors in the Church, to this hour. Such are my reſtraints, and ſuch is my liberty. I am bound by no regulations but what I myſelf approve; and within theſe boundaries I do as I pleaſe, no man forbidding or controling me.

Indeed I have often thought that I have as good a right to the name of Independent as yourſelf. Neither you nor I would aſſume it to the prejudice of our dependence upon our Lord and Saviour; and with reſpect to the influence of men, perhaps we have the advantage of you. I think we are more independent of our brethren, and more independent of our people.

Though according to your plan every particular Church is called Independent, as poſſeſſing and exerciſing every kind of Church power within itſelf, and not ſubject to the control of any other Chriſtian ſociety; yet conſidering you as a body,

body, or (according to the modern phraſe) an *Intereſt*, there is a kind of union and aſſociation among your Miniſters, which has a greater effect than ſome people are aware of, and which I apprehend may in ſome inſtances be rather unfriendly to the liberty you ſo highly prize. Some of your Miniſters, from their ſituation or connection, have more influence than others. They have opportunities of aſſiſting poorer Miniſters, and are I ſuppoſe in many caſes the judges whether they ſhall be aſſiſted or not, and how far. They who beſt know human nature, are beſt qualified to judge how far the profeſſed indepen-

dence of your Churches may be abated by this influence of connection; and whether the weight of a *Board* of Miniſters may not be occaſionally felt by thoſe who pity us for being ſubordinate to a *Bench* of Biſhops. I own, I have upon ſome occaſions been led to compare your Miniſters to a company of ſoldiers in their exerciſe; where every one muſt move in a preſcribed line, keep the ſame pace, and make the like motions with the reſt, on pain of being treated as refractory. Miniſters in the eſtabliſhment know nothing of theſe reſtraints. We are connected in love, but not upon ſyſtem. We profeſs the ſame

leading

leading principles and aims, but each one acts ſingly and individually for himſelf.

I think we are likewiſe more independent of our people. The conſtitution of your Churches, which you ſuppoſe the only one agreeable to the Scripture, appears to me faulty, in giving a greater power to the people than the Scripture authorizes. There is doubtleſs a ſenſe in which Miniſters are not only the ſervants of the Lord, but for his ſake, the ſervants of the Churches; but it is a ſervice which implies rule, and is entitled to reſpect. Thus the Apoſtle ſays, Obey them that have the rule over you. Their

office is that of a ſteward, who is neither to lord it over the houſehold, nor to be entirely under ſubjection to it, but to ſuperintend and provide for the family. Scriptural regulations are wiſely and graciouſly adapted to our ſtate of infirmity, but I think the power which the people with you claim and attempt to exerciſe is not ſo. Many of them, though truly gracious perſons, may notwithſtanding, from their ſituation in life, their want of education, and the narrowneſs of their views, be very incapable of government; yet when a number of ſuch are aſſociated according to your plan, under the honourable

able title of a Church of Chriſt, they acquire a great importance. Almoſt every individual conceives himſelf qualified to judge and to guide the Miniſter; to ſift and ſcrutinize his expreſſions, and to tell him how and what he ought to preach. But the poorer part of your flocks are not always the moſt troubleſome. The rich can contribute moſt to the Miniſter's ſupport, who is often entirely dependant upon his people for a maintenance; their riches likewiſe give them ſome additional weight and influence in the Church; and the officers whom you call the Deacons are uſually choſen from among the more

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wealthy. But it is not always found that the moſt wealthy Church-members are the moſt eminent either for grace or wiſdom. We may be rather ſure, that riches, if the poſſeſſors are not proportionably humble and ſpiritual, have a direct tendency to nouriſh the worms of ſelf-conceit, and ſelf-will. Such perſons expect to be conſulted, and that their judgment ſhall be followed. The preaching muſt be ſuited to their taſte and ſentiment, and if any thing is either enforced or cenſured which bears hard upon their conduct, they think themſelves ill-treated. Although a faithful Miniſter, in his better hours,

hours, diſdains the thought of complying with the caprice of his hearers, or conniving at their faults; yet human nature is weak, and it muſt be allowed, that in ſuch circumſtances he ſtands in a ſtate of temptation. And if he has grace to maintain his integrity, yet it is painful and difficult to be obliged frequently to diſpleaſe thoſe on whom we depend, and who in ſome other reſpects may be our beſt friends and benefactors. I can truly ſay that my heart has been grieved for the oppoſition, neglect, and unkindneſs which ſome valuable men among you have to my knowledge met with, from thoſe who

ought to have eſteemed them very highly for their work ſake. The effects of this ſupreme power lodged in the people, and of the unſanctified ſpirit in which it has been exerciſed, have been often viſible in the diviſions and ſubdiviſions which have crumbled large ſocieties into ſeparate handfuls, if I may ſo ſpeak. And to this I am afraid, rather than to the ſpread of a work of grace, may be aſcribed in many inſtances, the great increaſe of the number of your Churches, of late years. Now in the eſtabliſhment we know but little of theſe difficulties: We are not ſo much at the mercy of our hearers for our ſubſiſtence;

ſiſtence; and though we probably preach to ſome who are wiſer and better, as well as richer than ourſelves, we have no hearers who aſſume a right to direct us, or whom we ſhould ſtand in fear of if they did. For my own part, I wiſh to have a ſpirit willing to profit by a hint even from a child, and to pay attention to the advice of any perſon who ſpeaks to me in love, and in a right temper. But humble loving Chriſtians are more diſpoſed to find fault with themſelves than with their Miniſter, and to receive inſtruction than to offer it. But ſhould a conformiſt to the world, or a zealot for a party

expect

expect me to accommodate my preaching to his practice, or to his Shibboleth, I could give him an answer without being afraid of consequences.

I may add, that I apprehend we have more liberty with respect to our pulpits. At least I remember to have heard sermons from some of your pulpits, the strain of which has been so very different from the professed sentiments of the proper Pastor of the Church, that I have thought to myself, How came this Minister to preach in this place? Upon enquiry I have found at one time, that the Gentleman belonged to the *connection*; at another, that he

he was aſked to preach at the deſire of a principal perſon in the Church or Congregation, who it ſeems approved him, though I was perſuaded the Paſtor did not.

I eſteem it likewiſe a branch of my Chriſtian liberty, that I can hear whom I pleaſe, and form what acquaintance I pleaſe, among the various denominations of Chriſtians, without being called to account for it. I hope the Diſſenters are likewiſe growing more into this liberty. However, as I know ſome among your people who would willingly hear us occaſionally, were they not afraid of their Miniſters; ſo I know

know ſome of your Miniſters who would be willing to hear us, but do not, becauſe they are afraid of their people.

Thus much (though more might be ſaid) by way of comparing our advantages in point of liberty. I am well pleaſed with my lot; if you are equally pleaſed with yours I am glad of it. I write only on the defenſive, I neither expect nor wiſh to alter your views. Enjoy your liberty; only allow me to enjoy and be thankful for mine.

I have now acquainted you with my two principal reaſons for not being a Diſſenter. The firſt concerned my conſcience. For though my

my regard to the authority of the great Lord and Lawgiver of the Church did not directly oblige me to unite with the eſtabliſhment, it diſcouraged me from uniting with any of the parties, who pretended an excluſive right from Him to enforce their own particular Church forms. When conſcience did not interfere, my ſecond reaſon, though rather of a prudential kind, was of conſiderable weight with me. I loved liberty, and therefore gave a preference to the Church of England, believing I might in that ſituation exerciſe my Miniſtry with the moſt freedom. I have made the experiment, and have no reaſon

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to repent of it. Theſe points being cleared, my way was open to attend to another conſideration which had a farther influence in dermining my mind. This, I am about to offer to you as a third reaſon for my being where I am —THE PROBABILITY OF GREATER USEFULNESS. This probability as to myſelf and to others who can conform with a good conſcience, ſeemed to lie on the ſide of the eſtabliſhment upon ſeveral accounts.

1. Great multitudes in this Chriſtian nation (ſo called) are groſsly ignorant of the firſt principles of Religion, inattentive to the worth and welfare of their ſouls,

ſouls, and lamentably deſtitute of the proper means of inſtruction. I hoped for opportunities in the eſtabliſhment of preaching to many who could not hear the Diſſenters. The children of God, known to himſelf, are ſcattered abroad, far and wide. And as faith more uſually comes by hearing, I admire his condeſcenſion and goodneſs in permitting his Miniſters to think differently on ſome external points, that they may with an upright heart ſerve him in the different departments of his vineyard. They who are Diſſenters upon principle, would act againſt their judgments and conſciences, were they to conform

form for the ſake of uſefulneſs. I am well content that they ſhould remain as they are. But it has proved a mercy to thouſands, that all, who are called and qualified to preach the Goſpel, are not like-minded in this reſpect.

2. The ſpirit of bigotry and prejudice is too prevalent on all ſides. As there are Diſſenters who would think it ſinful to be ſeen within the walls of a Church; ſo there are other perſons who place a principal part of their religion in an ignorant attachment to our forms, and could not eaſily be prevailed upon to enter within the doors of a Meeting-houſe. But their prepoſſeſſion

in favour of our Churches gives the Miniſter who can conſcientiouſly meet them there a great advantage *ad hominem*, by confirming the truths of the Goſpel (which when firſt declared are generally diſliked and oppoſed) from the tenor of our Liturgy and Articles, to which they profeſs ſome regard. A large part of our auditories, eſpecially in places where the Goſpel is conſidered as a novelty, conſiſts of perſons of this deſcription. But the Lord has been pleaſed in very many inſtances to honour our ſervice amongſt them with his bleſſing. By the power of his Spirit the truth is made manifeſt to their

hearts, they are turned from darkneſs to light, and from the bondage of ſin, to ſerve the living God. Then their former prejudices ſubſide; inſomuch that many, who once deſpiſed and hated the Diſſenters, have been afterwards perſuaded to join with them. The Diſſenting Intereſt would probably have been much weaker than it is at preſent, if it had not been ſtrengthened by the acceſſion of many Church-members, and more than a few of your Teachers and Paſtors, who had no inclination to hear your Miniſters, until they were firſt awakened under ours. The words of our Lord may in this ſenſe

ſenſe be applied to many of your Churches, Other men laboured, and ye have entered into the fruits of their labours. The aim of my Miniſtry, I truſt, is not to promote the intereſts of a party, but to win ſouls for Chriſt. We have however the comfort to find that a number are not only called but edified and eſtabliſhed by the bleſſing of God on our preaching; and that many of the moſt judicious and ſpiritual of our people, are proof againſt the inſinuations which prevail on ſome to forſake the Church of England, in hopes of enjoying a purer and more acceptable worſhip among the Diſſenters. As to thoſe who do

leave us, if they are truly benefited, if they really grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord, in humility, meekneſs, benevolence, and deadneſs to the world, more among you, than they would have done amongſt us, I can ſincerely rejoice. But I think your brethren have no juſt reaſon to be either diſpleaſed or ſorry, that God has raiſed up Miniſters to preach to thouſands, to whom they would never have had acceſs.

3. I ſaw likewiſe that the Lord had been pleaſed of late years to return by the power of his Spirit to the Church of England, which I believe many Diſſenters thought

he had ſo utterly forſaken that he would return no more. This leads me to a tender point, and I wiſh to touch upon it with great tenderneſs. We have none of us any thing to boaſt of. Our warmeſt exertions in the ſervice of ſuch a Maſter, are far too cold; and our greateſt ſucceſs falls very ſhort of what we ought to pray for. We preach no other Goſpel than you do. We love and reſpect many of your Miniſters, for their knowledge, piety, and exemplary converſation. But I believe you will allow that the general ſtate of your Churches at preſent, is not ſo lively and flouriſhing as it was in the days of

the old Nonconformiſts. I believe the beſt of your people were long ago ſenſible of a decline, that they ſincerely lamented it, and earneſtly prayed for a revival. Their prayers were at length anſwered, but not in the way they expected. A great and ſpreading revival of Religion took place, but the inſtruments were not Diſſenters. At the time when I was ordained there was a conſiderable number of regular parochial Miniſters who preached the doctrines of the Reformation. The number has been greatly increaſed ſince, and is ſtill increaſing. I could not but judge, that the Lord's preſence with his word

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in awakening ſinners, and in applying it with power to the heart, was more evident and ſtriking on this ſide, than on yours. Not becauſe we are better than you; but becauſe the work with us is rather new, whereas amongſt you it is of an older date. The hiſtory of the Church of God and of human nature in paſt ages, teaches us to expect that revivals of Religion will ſeldom ſtand long at their primitive height, but will gradually ſubſide and degenerate till things return in a courſe of time nearly to their former ſtate: though a name, perhaps firſt impoſed as a ſtigma by the world, and a form, which

owed all its value to the Spirit that once enlivened it, may ſtill remain. I wiſh I could affirm that none who were otherwiſe competent judges of a revival, have been prevented by their prepoſſeſſions from rejoicing in what God has wrought amongſt us. But I fear it has been otherwiſe, and that a ſpirit of prejudice and party diſcovered itſelf upon the occaſion, which proved hurtful to ſome good men. When I think of the abilities and characters of ſome Diſſenting Miniſters, I cannot but aſcribe the little viſible ſucceſs they meet with, in ſome meaſure to their unwillingneſs to acknowledge a

work

work of God in which they themſelves were not employed. Their exceptions were not wholly groundleſs: A lively zeal for the glory of God and the good of ſouls, in perſons whoſe judgments were not fully ripened by obſervation and experience, did not ſecure them from incidental miſtakes and blemiſhes. Theſe were eaſily ſeen and eagerly noticed. A deſire of being free from the leaſt ſuſpicion of giving countenance to the unguarded, though well meant ſallies of active ſpirits, ſeems to have led ſome of your Miniſters into a contrary extreme; and their public diſcourſes, though ſolid and judicious

dicious compoſitions, loſt that animation in delivery, which is in ſome degree neceſſary to engage attention, and to keep up an auditory. Thus, while preachers much inferior to them for learning and general knowledge in divinity have had crowded aſſemblies, the pleaſure with which I have heard ſome of your moſt eminent Miniſters, has been often abated by obſerving that the number of the hearers has been much ſmaller than the number of pews in the place. I muſt therefore confeſs that one conſideration which deterred me from joining the Diſſenters was, a fear leſt the love of peace, and a temper rather com-

compliant, might inſenſibly betray me into an overcautious ſpirit, damp my zeal, or divert it into a wrong channel, and thereby prevent the ſucceſs at which I aimed. I rather choſe to unite with thoſe people whom I thought the moſt likely to maintain and encourage what little fervour I poſſeſſed; and where I ſaw the moſt evident tokens of a power from on high accompanying the public miniſtrations. And as I had my reaſons likewiſe for not being an itinerant, a regular and ſtated charge in the Eſtabliſhed Church engaged my preference.

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My fourth reaſon (the laſt I think it neceſſary to mention) being rather a point of experience, muſt depend chiefly upon my own teſtimony, and therefore I need not enlarge much upon it. Superadded however to thoſe which I have already ſtated, it greatly contributed to give full ſatisfaction to my mind: I mean, the proofs I had, that the Lord BY THE OPENINGS AND LEADINGS OF HIS PROVIDENCE, pointed out to me the ſituation in which I was to ſerve him. The firſt explicit notice I gave of my deſire to enter the Miniſtry, was to an intimate friend in your denomination, nearly ſix years before

fore I was ordained. In the courſe of this interval I made and I received a variety of applications and propoſals, but every thing failed, and every door by which I ſought admiſſion remained ſhut againſt me. I have already obſerved that this ſtate of ſuſpenſe gave me leiſure to examine the ſubject of Church government more cloſely, and that the reſult of my diſquiſitions was the gradual and at length the complete removal of the difficulties and exceptions I had at firſt haſtily imbibed againſt the eſtabliſhment. At length the Lord's time came; then obſtacles apparently inſurmountable ſuddenly and unexpectedly

pectedly diſappeared. Then I learnt the reaſon of former diſappointments. My way had been mercifully hedged up with thorns, to prevent me from taking a wrong courſe, and to keep me waiting until the place and ſervice of his own appointment, were prepared and ready for me. The coincidence of many circumſtances which I cannot explain to another, gave me a very comfortable ſenſe of the Lord's guidance. I received ordination in the Church of England with a πληροφορια, with wind and tide (if I may ſo ſpeak) in my favour, with the moſt pleaſing diſpoſition of outward events, and

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the moſt aſſured perſuaſion in my own mind, that I was following the call, and doing the will of God; of which I had at that time little more doubt than if an angel had been ſent from Heaven to tell me ſo. Nor have I heſitated upon the point a ſingle hour, from that day to this.

I think you will not be ſorry to find I am drawing towards a cloſe. Indeed I ſhould be aſhamed to have written ſo much merely on my own account. I began this ideal correſpondence with you about ſeven years ago. More than one half of it was then written in a few weeks; but I felt a reluctance to proceed, becauſe it

ſeemed

ſeemed to be ſo much my own affair; but I have frequently thought ſince, that ſomething upon the ſubject, written in a moderate and friendly ſpirit (which it has been my prayer and endeavour to preſerve) might, by the Lord's bleſſing, be a mean of promoting candor and benevolence among thoſe, who, whatever elſe they differ in, have one Lord, one faith, one hope. A deſire of being inſtrumental in ſo good a work, has at length prevailed on me, to reviſe what I had begun, to add what I thought farther neceſſary for completing my deſign, and to ſend it abroad. I cannot give you particular reaſons

ſons why I have not done it ſooner, or why I do it now. Our times, plans, and purpoſes are under a ſuperior guidance and direction, which it is our duty and our privilege always to acknowledge, though we cannot always diſtinctly diſcern it. I ſhall be happy if the event ſhall prove that I have been led to chuſe the fitteſt time, and to offer a word in ſeaſon. They who love and preach the Lord Jeſus Chriſt in ſincerity, whatever name they bear among men, and whatever body of people they are united to, are engaged in one common cauſe. They are oppoſed by the ſame enemies, their ſevereſt conflicts, and their ſweeteſt

comforts are derived from the ſame ſources; and they will ere long meet in the ſame kingdom of glory, and join in the ſame ſongs of eternal praiſe, to Him who ſitteth upon the throne, and to Him who redeemed us to God by his blood. How deſirable then is it, that while we live here, we ſhould be at peace amongſt ourſelves! and live in the ſpirit of that love (the only infallible mark of our being truly the ſervants of Chriſt) which ſeeketh not its own, is not eaſily provoked, thinketh no evil, but beareth, hopeth, and believeth all things.

As what I write to you is to appear in print, I think it proper to add,

add, for my own ſake, that my whole intention will be fulfilled by the publication. I do not mean to enter into controverſy; and therefore if theſe letters, contrary to my wiſh, ſhould raiſe me an opponent, and give occaſion to an anſwer, I ſhall not think myſelf bound to reply, unleſs I could be convicted of ſuch wilful miſrepreſentation, as would render it my duty to aſk pardon of God, and of the Public.

I commend you and yours to the bleſſing of our Lord, and remain

Your affectionate Friend—

March 1, 1784.

FINIS.

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